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# Isfana—A Land of Diversities

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April 2018

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Even though Isfana is situated in a politically difficult part of Kyrgyzstan, it has been home to many different ethnicities that have managed to live side by side for centuries. To understand the multi-ethnic society of Kyrgyzstan today, we need to study its complex history.

Isfana, a small town located close to the Tajik and Uzbek borders, is a good example of a multi-ethnic community that has existed for centuries in the territory of today's Kyrgyzstan. Unfortunately, only a few scholarly works have addressed the rich history of the town that once held caravanserais of the Great Silk Road.<sup>1</sup> This paper, one of the first of its kind, will make a significant contribution to the study of the region and Kyrgyzstan's history as a whole. It aims to study the factors that have contributed to maintaining viable inter-ethnic relations in Isfana and trace their historical roots. This study is designed to examine: the factors allowing citizens<sup>1</sup> to live in peace; identify the

mechanisms utilized by communities to promote social interaction; and reveal how relationships between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Isfana have evolved over time. To that end, I will examine everyday life habits of Isfanans, spheres of interaction and how some public figures played a significant role in improving inter-ethnic relations in the town.

I will apply social capital theory in an attempt to conditionally measure its cultural and political dimensions. Stories of friendship between famous people from Isfana, mixed neighbourhoods with Kyrgyz and Uzbeks households side by side, life-cycle celebrations involving representatives of all nationalities of Isfana, regularly held national games such as *kurosh* and *ulaq*, and the hospitality of the people of Isfana—all are seen as important prerequisites for sustaining peace in the town. In addition, I will discuss the impact of the inter-ethnic clashes of June 2010 in Osh and Jalal-Abad on Isfanans.

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<sup>1</sup>Isfana was named a town (town is *ropod* in Russian and *шаар* in Kyrgyz) in 2001 by the decree of President Askar Akaev.

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This paper is part of **Global Voices on Pluralism**, a new publication series from the **Global Centre for Pluralism**. These seven papers were produced in 2016 as a part of **History and memory in Kyrgyzstan – toward an inclusive society**, a project developed to support local scholars. Each paper explores an aspect of Kyrgyzstan's history as a diverse society with the aim of generating awareness in Kyrgyzstan about the importance of more inclusive historical narratives as a pathway to pluralism.

## II. STRUCTURE OF THE TOWN

According to the first National Population Census of the Kyrgyz Republic from 1999, Isfana's population was 75.9% Uzbek and 21.5% Kyrgyz, compared to 98% Uzbek in 1961.<sup>2</sup> The population census of the National Statistics Committee from 2009 does not state the ethnic composition of Isfana town separately, but rather as a part of the Leilek District, according to which, Kyrgyz make up 66.3 % and Uzbeks 26.9%.<sup>3</sup>

In 1970, the first village development plan was approved with a budget of only 450,000 rubles and reached 970,000 rubles in 1984.<sup>4</sup> In 1975, under the efforts of Yuldashev Abduvaris, a village activist, a branch of the Self-Sustained Construction Unit of Batken was founded in Isfana, which was tasked with constructing houses for the population with the money provided by them.

Tursunbay, an elderly Isfanan who worked for the local statistics bureau for more than 40 years, says that Isfana was a small village, and that everyone used to know each other. It was mostly Uzbek-populated and surrounded by Kyrgyz, who would come to the market on weekends. Everyone in the town knew each Kyrgyz living there and addressed them by adding the designation “–Kyrgyz.” For example, Ilash-Kyrgyz (whose Uzbek father married a Kyrgyz wife), Anar-Kyrgyz and Qurvon-Kyrgyz. That is, the Kyrgyz lived intermingled with, and married, Uzbeks or Tajiks.<sup>5</sup>

The Kyrgyz inhabitants of Isfana during the Soviet era were mostly intelligentsia from the capital Frunze (now Bishkek), who were originally from nearby villages of the Leilek District. They used to live only in the central administrative part of the town, but today they are becoming numerous and live among Uzbek families. Old *mahallas* (traditional neighbourhoods) are still only Uzbek-populated, whereas new micro-

regions (modern apartment neighbourhoods) are inhabited by both and other ethnic groups. A parallel story was told by Jazgul, a Kyrgyz teacher, according to which, “rich Kyrgyz people stayed in Isfana for the winter period and left for the meadows the rest of the time of the year. People were not divided into ethnicities at that time.”<sup>6</sup>

Historically, Isfana belonged to the Ustrushana Khanate (from the 7th to 10th centuries), what was then called Aspanikent, and which was a major caravan stop on the Silk Road. Its springs, valleys and hospitable people made it an appropriate place to build caravanserais for traders to stay.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Isfanians had frequent trade interactions with the nearby Tajik cities, Khujand and Ura-Tepa. Many of these Tajik visitors decided to settle in Isfana, making its population a diverse mixture of people with Persian, Mogul and Turkic origins.

The historical record shows that celebrations in the town always included traditional sports, *kurosh* or *ulaq*, which were known as Uzbek and also Kyrgyz. Nowadays, modern Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Tajiks from Isfana, and nearby cities and villages, gather to play *kurosh* and *ulaq* at weddings and national holidays like Nowruz (traditional New Year), Victory Day on 9 May and other occasions.

Friendly relationships with people of different nationalities and other villagers are an old Isfanan tradition. Uzbeks of Isfana used to organize life-cycle social events (weddings, circumcisions, funerals) together with their fellow Kyrgyz Isfanans. Both ethnic groups would invite each other to weddings, intermarry and support each other in times of grief. Old men of the village would gather at *chaykhanas* (tea houses) for a cup of tea and *askiya* (traditional joke telling).

The most cherished folk story about Isfana's peaceful inter-ethnic co-existence is the story of Iskhak Razzakov, who later occupied several respected

positions in the “Kirghiz” and Uzbek Soviet republics. Usta Rajabboy, who was an ethnic Uzbek known for his kindness to orphans, took Razzakov under his care. Rajabboy would walk around the village and gather orphans at his place, feeding, dressing and educating them along with his friend, Tosh Boyvachcha. Afterwards, they would send the children to the closest orphanage in the Tajik city of Prolitarsk. Razzakov was one of their apprentices. Razzakov’s lifelong friendship with his Uzbek fellows from Tosh Boyvachcha’s house demonstrates the friendly ties between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek. Otaquzi Azizov, a famous scholar, was another apprentice of Usta Rajabboy and a good friend of Iskhak Razzakov. Throughout their lives, they stayed active in the life of the village, participating in various development and infrastructure projects.

### III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To better understand the social conditions in society that have prevented Isfana from inter-ethnic confrontations (compared to other places in Kyrgyzstan), I have applied social capital theory.

Social capital theory has gained wide acceptance as a fruitful theoretical perspective for understanding and predicting the norms and social relations embedded in the social structures of societies.<sup>8</sup> It helps to explain not simply the extent to which people are connected to others, but the nature of those connections. Interpretations of social capital and its features are diverse. Consequently, methods used to measure social capital are varied, too. A number of scholars have mentioned the gap between the concept of social capital and its measurement. For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to conditionally measure its factors, or dimensions, as the indicators of social relations between two ethnic groups: the Uzbeks and

Kyrgyz of Isfana. Considering the time limitations, this study focuses on the cultural and political dimensions of social capital. Social events, like weddings and other celebrations, national sports, games and events are identified as cultural dimensions; and electing representatives of local administration and the role of *ayil bashchylary* (leaders of communities) in organizing communities are identified as political dimensions.

### IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research is designed to: study the contributions of social capital in sustaining peaceful relations among Isfanans; conditionally measure cultural and political dimensions of social capital; and find out the mechanisms utilized to sustain a pluralistic<sup>ii</sup> society and trace their roots in history. This research has two components which aim to:

1. Describe and analyze the current social capital in Isfana; and
2. Trace its roots in history.

In view of that, the main research question is the following: which dimensions of social capital have been utilized by the Isfanans to sustain a multi-ethnic society, and how did these dimensions evolve over time?

**Supporting Research Questions** (for the period of research)

1. How was Isfana formed as a village, and later a town?
2. What do the different ethnic groups in Isfana have in common?
3. Do the examples of Iskhak Razzakov and Otaquzi Azizov serve as a uniting force for Kyrgyz and Uzbeks? How do the Kyrgyz people consider the character of Iskhak Razzakov? Are they proud of

<sup>ii</sup>Pluralism, as defined by the Global Centre for Pluralism, is an ethic of respect for diversity.

him? How do they interpret his Uzbek history? Is his childhood in the Uzbek environment taken into consideration by the official history and by his fellow villagers?

4. Are the neighbourhoods segregated or do the different ethnic groups live together? Do Kyrgyz and Uzbeks interact in their daily lives, or are the neighbourhoods divided into Uzbek and Kyrgyz ones? How do they celebrate life-cycle events?
5. What are the roles of national sports games like *kurosh* and *ulaq* in sustaining a multi-ethnic society in Isfana? Do representatives of both ethnic groups participate in *kurosh* and *ulaq*? Do they organize sports games separately or together?
6. How does Isfana differ from Osh, where ethnic confrontations have occurred? What factors keep Isfana from having these confrontations?
7. What unique situations have contributed to maintaining peace? Was there any occasion in history which served as a uniting force for Isfanans? Which comes first: ethnicity or a sense of belonging to the town?

## V. METHODOLOGY

I conducted two fieldwork trips in Isfana between June and September 2016 to gather the data necessary for research purposes. To that end, 16 interviews were conducted with local teachers, one with the head of the local newspaper, two with representatives from the local administration, as well as some with elderly residents. Historical narratives, essays and archives from the Iskhak Razzakov Museum and a museum focused on the local history of Isfana have been analyzed to shed light on people who played a significant role in the town's history. To identify the factors fostering positive relations between the different ethnicities, participant observation methods were carried out at shared places like Chynar

Chaykhana, the central bazaar, the House of Culture and the cattle market. I also participated in family celebrations (including at restaurants *Leilek* and *Aq Bata*) and national holidays, and observed life-cycle celebrations as well as *ulaq* and *kurosh* games. Finally, I also collected narratives from elderly members of the town in order to include its oral history and stories of people working in such a multi-ethnic environment.

## VI. THE HISTORY OF THE TOWN

Isfana, a land of green meadows, icy springs and fertile soil, has attracted people for centuries. It drew people from the surrounding khanates, who took refuge there and built a fortress to protect themselves from enemies. With time, it grew into a densely populated village with a diverse population from Khujand, Kokand, Samarkand, Tashkent and other places. Archeological expeditions during the Tsarist Russian rule were not conducted in Isfana. This makes it difficult to accurately trace the possible time of Isfana's establishment.

Numan Negmatov was the first scholar to reconstruct the territory of the ancient Ustrushana State, and proposed that Isfana, which was once known as Asbanikent, had belonged to this state.<sup>9</sup> The capital of Ustrushana was Ura-Tepa, which is only approximately 292 km away from Isfana. In this case, the history of Isfana goes back as far as the 1st to 9th centuries. In addition, Zadneprovskiy, a prominent Russian ethnographer, has found artifacts dating back to between the 9th and 16th centuries in the Isfana Fortress as well. The Ustrushana State, which captured the cities at the foot of the Turkistan mountain range, had trade relationships with the population of the Fergana Valley. It also had a caravanserai on the

Kokand–Samarkand route of the Silk Road. The caravanserai was situated 9 km away from Asbanikent, in present-day Kara-Bulak. Many artifacts found in Isfana from the Zoroastrian period BCE have not been properly studied and leave open discussions about the town’s origin. For that reason, many historians only follow the proposition put forth by Dr. Galina A. Brykina (from the Russian Academy of Science, Institute of Archeology), that Asbanikent was formed in the territory of present-day Kara-Bulak and moved to the current location over time.<sup>10</sup>

Temirboy Yakubov (2001) mentions that representatives of different nations including Massagetae, Sughds, Sakas, Zoroastrians and Persian-Tajik speaking people, stayed in Isfana and over time inter-mixed and made up the village’s community.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, this was a long process taking years and centuries, which makes the Isfanans a mixture of peoples with Persian-Tajik speaking and Turkic speaking origins. Since Turkic speakers outnumbered the Tajik speakers, Turkic languages prevailed in the region. The literary works were written in the Middle Turkic language, like *Kutadgu Bilig*, which is considered to be the common heritage of all Turkic-speaking nations today.

The history of Isfana cannot be written or studied without considering the history of nearby towns and villages. Isfanans had a good relationship with their neighbouring cities and villages. They were closely connected to Khujand 50 km away. They would trade fur, hides and grains for cotton, weaving materials, crockery, saddle clothes and footwear from Khujand. Isfanans invited carpenters from Khujand and other specialists to guide them in construction. In fact, Isfana, as a *volost* (territorial unit of the Russian Empire) used to belong to the Khujand Uyezd of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) from 1917 to 1926 and was transferred to the newly formed Kirghiz Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic thanks to the efforts of local activists from Leilek District. In the Soviet period, Isfana

has received rather modest attention, and life was concentrated around the activities of *kolkhozes* (collective farms) and agricultural production.

*Isfana Aiyl Keneshy* (the Isfana Rural Council) was formed in 1937 and became the administrative centre of Leilek District. Isfana Aiyl Keneshy was changed into the Isfana Village Council in 1996. In 2001, Isfana received regional town status and became the central city of Leilek District. The Isfana Town Council was formed under President Askar Akaev’s decree No.21 in 2001. Today, the Isfana Town Council comprises the villages of Taylan, Ak-Bulak, Chimgen, Samat, Murza-Patcha and Golbo. The population of Isfana and the subordinated villages is currently 30,077, of which 19,908 reside in Isfana itself.<sup>12</sup> In the north, Isfana borders the village of Kurgoncha of the Republic of Tajikistan. The major sources of livelihood are farming, stockbreeding and small enterprise.

## VII. MEASURING DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Considering the time constraints and limited budget, I chose to examine the cultural and political dimensions of social capital in order to assess the contribution of social capital in sustaining a pluralistic society in multi-ethnic Isfana.

### Cultural Dimensions

To measure the cultural dimensions of social capital the following practices were chosen:

- Common norms of behaviour
- The friendships of famous Isfanans
- Life-cycle celebrations
- The national sports/games of *kurosh* and *ulaq*

### *Common norms of behaviour*

A local high school teacher, Nigora, shared her observations, saying that a common moral repeated in both communities for young people is that:

All citizens of Isfana, be they Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Tatar or Tajik, call Isfana their motherland, the land where their relatives live, the land where they and their children were born. All ethnicities live and work side by side, celebrate their life-cycle events together and keep neighbourly relations.<sup>13</sup>

A representative of the town administration added the following to the words of his fellow countrywoman:

All of us have a common way of life. Each of us knows one another from childhood. There is good intercommunication here, and we feel almost like relatives. It is politicians who divide us into nations, but the people are not divided. Ethnic groups trying to unite ethnicities also divide us into groups.<sup>14</sup>

A party called “*kollektiv*” held a day before wedding celebrations, is a traditional time for people to come together. Parents of the bride and groom invite their acquaintances, coworkers and friends to celebrate the marriage. Since Uzbeks and Kyrgyz have always attended each other’s events, they now notice the fact that they have adopted certain traditions from each other. For instance, Kyrgyz brides now use the greeting “*kelin salom*,” which was not a common practice before, whereas Uzbeks have adopted the custom of greeting everybody one by one at the celebration—previously, they used to say a general “*hi*” to everyone in the room. Editor-in-chief of the *Ata-Jurt* newspaper Abdilaat Doorov added:

From Uzbeks we adopted an appointed time for our weddings. Before we used to call everyone for the *toy* (celebration), and they would come from morning till night, whenever they wanted. But

now we invite people for a certain time of the day. Our Uzbek brothers customarily invite men for breakfast and ladies for the afternoon.<sup>15</sup>

Male gatherings in *chaykhanas* (tea houses) are another example of inter-cultural mixture and communications. “Any life-event here is mixed,” said an elderly man in the *chaykhana* while enjoying his green tea and playing chess under the shade of trees. “Look at us—some of us wearing a *kalpak* (Kyrgyz hat) and some *doppa* (Uzbek skullcap),” he said, laughing.



Men from Uzbek and Kyrgyz in a *chaykhana* yard

Overall, most of the local teachers from both ethnicities generally consider that multi-ethnic places are more developed than homogeneous societies and consider Isfana to be more civilized than the capital of Batken Oblast, Batken City.

And so, the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz of Isfana interact on a daily basis and during social events. Deliberately or not, they have adopted ways of behaviour and norms from each other.

### *Friendship of Historical Figures of Isfana*

As mentioned above, the most cherished story among Isfanans is the story of Iskhak Razzakov, who was the first secretary of the Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) (or Kirghizia, the territory that became Kyrgyzstan after post-Soviet independence) from 1950–61, and held several respected positions in the Uzbek SSR in the 1940s.

Razzakov was the first secretary of the Kirghiz SSR for 11 years. Under his rule, the economy of the republic developed considerably. Kirghizia grew cotton and beets; the energy sector also developed, becoming the second largest after Uzbekistan; infrastructure, transportation, educational institutions, cultural facilities, medical facilities and agriculture all increased; and the annual production plan (set by Moscow) was more than fulfilled. In addition to these achievements, Razzakov established a free breakfast in all secondary educational facilities throughout the Kyrgyz SSR as he considered education to be the most important factor in building a nation. People who knew Razzakov personally considered him as a “good specialist, orator, just, patient, outgoing, intelligent, brave, talented, simple and at times fundamental.”<sup>16</sup>

After his father passed away, Usta Rajabboy and Tosh Boyvachcha took Razzakov to their house and later sent him to a Tajik boarding school. Razzakov’s lifelong friendship with his Uzbek fellows from Tosh Boyvachcha’s house demonstrates the friendship between ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek people. Otaquzi Azizov, a famous scholar, was another apprentice of Usta Rajabboy and a good friend of Iskhak Razzakov’s. Throughout their lives, they both stayed active in the life of the village, participating in various development and infrastructure projects.<sup>17</sup>

At the initiative of the local administration, the 80th anniversary of Iskhak Razzakov’s birth was celebrated in Isfana in 1990. Azizov attended the celebration

and both the Uzbek and Kyrgyz people of Isfana were actively involved in the celebration. People still remember the event with a lot of enthusiasm. Events that are associated with Razzakov are a shared symbol of unity for the people of Isfana.<sup>18</sup>

Unfortunately, although people talk about Razzakov’s Uzbek connections, it is either ignored or misinterpreted by some sources. According to the authors of *Leilek tarykhy (History of Leilek)* Razzakov was forced to leave Kyrgyzstan when he was eight or nine years old.<sup>19</sup> A local high school teacher, Nigora on the other hand, remembers Razzakov visiting her grandfather Jo’ra Tusmatov’s house every time he came to Isfana. Tusmatov, a manager at the local market, was the one who sheltered Razzakov and used to visit him in the boarding school in Khujand, Tajikistan, a place seen as more developed with opportunities for better education.<sup>20</sup>

Razzakov’s official life story at the Iskhak Razzakov Museum in Isfana omits the part of his life after his parents’ death up to the time he reached the Tajik city. Upon request for more information, the guide stated that Razzakov left Kirghizia in 1919. His father died leaving him with his uncle or aunt, who took him to the Tajik boarding school. The guide also said they do not have information about this part of his life.<sup>21</sup> Yakubov (2001), for his part, writes about Razzakov’s time spent in a household in Isfana in detail.<sup>22</sup> A recent article, “The Great Son of Three Nations,” in the local newspaper *Suley Info!* by Husanbay Kurbanov also argues that Razzakov was raised by the Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik nations.<sup>23</sup>

According to the interviews conducted, Isfanans had the following impressions about the figure of Razzakov:

- Razzakov formed the foundation of today’s Kyrgyz Republic, and after him no one did as much as he did on behalf of the republic.

- He sent Kirghizia's students to Moscow and Leningrad, viewed education as the highest priority and worked hard to eliminate illiteracy.
- He was a model leader who could freely talk in the Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek and Russian languages. When he spoke in Uzbek, nobody thought he was Kyrgyz.
- He was talented, self-reliant and resourceful, and had a difficult childhood.
- He was the first to initiate the commemoration of Manas, the famous Kyrgyz folk hero. In a 1947 letter to Stalin, Razzakov noted Manas' 1,110th anniversary.
- He was a man blessed by God.

Despite the fact that Razzakov's Uzbek connections are currently ignored by both officials and in Kyrgyz language literature, Uzbeks consider him as an ideal representative of Kyrgyz fellows. Kyrgyz people, on the other hand, recall his pluralistic attitude in ethnic issues; they consider his words as guidance on how to treat other nations and act more tolerantly towards other ethnic groups. One can say Razzakov acted as a role model for both ethnicities and his intercultural legacy is the first thing Isfanans recall when talking about inter-ethnic relations.

Despite the existence of contradictory views on Razzakov—Isfana officials and some Kyrgyz writers dismiss Razzakov's intercultural legacy, while Uzbeks tend to underline his Uzbek connections—at the local level, his legacy remains strong. In any case, Razzakov represented the model of the Soviet ideology of the “friendship of the peoples” and acted to keep the inter-ethnic harmony in his society though many would not agree with it.

### ***National sports games: kurosh and ulaq***

*Ulaq* and *kurosh* are the oldest surviving forms of traditional sports played throughout Central Asia and serve as an excellent means for uniting people. People who used to ride a horse in *ulaq* games in Isfana could

equally participate in *kurosh* competitions too.<sup>24</sup> This is very much the same nowadays, too. Horsemen and wrestlers from nearby cities and countries arrive in Isfana to participate in such games, which have been organized since ancient times. The visitors form groups on the spot not based on ethnicity, but according to place of origin; otherwise, everyone plays for themselves and people choose to support the participant they like or think is the strongest.

*Kurosh* is a style of folk wrestling, where wrestlers use a sash to hold their opponents and try to throw each other off balance. From ancient times, skillful equestrians and *balbans* (wrestlers) from Isfana have demonstrated their skills and bravery at weddings, holidays and competitions. The legendary *balbans* from Leilek used to go as far as the City of Kokand and win competitions. The strongest ones won the Central Asian and Kazakhstan championships. Shadimuratov Ata, Vaydulla Yuldashev, Isman Aydarov, Alimbek Karjodiev, Boston Aybashev, Toqtosh Aytbaev, Babaraim Karimov, Abdyrakman Momunov, Akbarali Ortikov and Hasanov Jalil are among the 100 most outstanding *balbans* of the Leilek District. People give nicknames to *balbans* according to their abilities. For instance, people called Jora Mahkam, a well-known *balban*, a “Cart *Balban*” for his ability to lift large carts stuck in the mud and rivers and put them back on the road.

Based on the rules and techniques, Leilek “*kuroshy*” differs from “*kurosh*” played in the North, a local journalist explained, having published several articles about Leilek *kuroshy*.<sup>25</sup> In Leilek, if the knee of the opponent touches the ground, it is counted as a win, whereas in the national *kurosh*, the opponent has to fall down. The rules of Leilek *kuroshy* are common across the Fergana Valley, despite the post-Soviet borders between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The essence of the game is to defeat the opponent without roughness and handle loss without dejection. It teaches people to be tactical and control their power.



*Ulaq* (officially kok-boru, also known as buzkashi or kupkari—literally goat grabbing) is a horseracing game played throughout Central Asia in which equestrians try to grab the carcass of a goat from each other. There are specific features of Leilek ulaq which distinguish it from ulaq played in other parts of the country, as well as neighbouring countries, where such practice exists.<sup>26</sup> While participants play in groups in the Kyrgyz National Kok-Boru, in Leilek ulaq everyone plays for themselves. The strongest and the smartest equestrian who takes the carcass to the goal is the winner.

Ulaq is a popular form of entertainment in the *Sunnat toys* (circumcision ceremonies) of boys in Isfana. Isfanans are proud to have provided the Khujand and Kokand khanates with competition horses from ancient times. According to a retired teacher in Isfana, nowadays, mostly wealthy people organize ulaq—the richer the organizer, the bigger the event.<sup>27</sup> For instance, according to this teacher, a wealthy local farmer held the last ulaq where people from around the country, and from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, were invited. Anybody from anywhere who hears about the event and wants to try his luck and power can take part in the game. People from faraway places come and stay at the organizer's or other horse-breeders' houses until the end of the games. However, in the words of locals, according to tradition, if a person from anywhere participates and tries the meat of the goat used in any ulaq game, he is obliged to organize a game, too.

During Soviet times, people were prevented from holding ulaq; however, people would stand their ground. When a rich man was jailed for holding an ulaq event, people demanded his release and he was subsequently freed. Elderly Isfanans believe this made Soviets legitimize kurosh as one of the national sports games of Soviet nations.<sup>28</sup>

In the words of men from Isfana, when kurosh or ulaq is held, all interested people gather and make the event

highly entertaining and enjoyable. They come eager to enjoy exciting games without any detailed knowledge of participants and choose to support the ones they like most. Because of the openness and spontaneity of the games people consider players as first individuals rather than representatives of any ethnicities. These events serve as another opportunity for Isfanans to socialize and enjoy each other's company, meet new people and make plans for future competitions. People talk about each other as the representatives of a region or even a country but from an outsider's point of view, one does not feel there is division or support according to ethnicity.

## Political Dimensions

### *Recruitment in the local administration*

To measure the political dimensions of social capital, the following two practices were chosen: political engagement, i.e., recruitment in the local administration; and the role of *Ayil bashchysy* (village head) and *kocho jamaaty* (neighbourhood community) in decision-making in the local neighbourhoods.

In the words of a representative of the local administration, there is no division among people of different ethnic groups living in Isfana: "After forty years of work at the administration, I have never seen any division, only when choosing a city mayor. People debate: should it be a Kyrgyz or an Uzbek?"<sup>29</sup> Tensions regularly flare up between the deputies of Isfana, *Ayil Keneshi*, before the election of a town mayor. Electoral campaigns occur along ethnic lines, as candidates tend to focus on this factor and use ethnic factors to benefit from it. However, people do not generally mobilize openly along ethnic lines even though each group is willing to support a candidate from his ethnic group, despite the fact they may not always support the results. In the end, people obey the instructions of any elected mayor; and no protests have happened so far. This demonstrates the bonding component of social capital

when people are supportive of the representative of any ethnicity. In recent years, one cannot help but notice that administration personnel are now mostly Kyrgyz, despite the fact that the Uzbek population outnumbers the Kyrgyz. The dominance of Kyrgyz people is increasing in the public and private sector as well. There is now an increasing number of Kyrgyz salespeople and taxi drivers. Uzbeks have been silently observing these changes and for the most part, do not discuss this phenomenon openly.

### *The role of ayil bashchysy in decision-making in local neighbourhoods*

As for the organization of neighbourhoods, every three-to-four neighbourhoods have their own *ayil bashchysy* (village head), who is responsible for organizing the community for different types of social and cleaning activities. While much depends on the personality of the ayil bashchy, they largely limit their activities to fundraising for certain celebrations or reconstruction work in the neighbourhood.

To elect their ayil bashchy, residents vote for candidates from their neighbourhood at official meetings organized for that purpose. The person with the most number of votes gets appointed for a four-year period.

People tend to support active leaders not necessarily from their own neighbourhood, but the ones who come up with ideas to improve the town and usually who are financially capable enough to accomplish their promises. In other words, they can support leaders from different ethnic groups as well. However, this phenomenon needs to be studied more closely.

## VIII. REACTION OF ISFANANS TO THE 2010 EVENTS IN OSH

As the above demonstrates, Isfanans live inter-mixed and visit each other's celebrations. This is not the case in Osh, where neighbourhoods are segregated and ethnicities hardly interact on a daily basis, except perhaps in the bazaar. In addition, people in Isfana are more tolerant of different ethnicities given the fact that they grow up interacting with different ethnicities. However, locals in Isfana recall the violent June 2010 events with fear. The inter-ethnic clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz which lasted for three days in June 2010 took the lives of hundreds and displaced thousands of people, traumatizing many for years to come.

Isfanans recall the clashes, saying that there was a fear of violence in Isfana as well, and men stood on guard at the entrance of the town. When clashes were happening in Osh, Kyrgyz and Uzbek elders and ayil bashchylary gathered in front of the former *Kolkhoz* (collective farm) building three times and made a deal not to fight each other. Meanwhile, people were panicking. Some tried to leave the city, and shops closed early. Teachers from a Kyrgyz gymnasium (school) think that "there was a big influence of Uzbekistan in Osh and people even thought that Osh belonged to Uzbekistan, which was one of the push factors for conflict."<sup>30</sup> Yet, all interviewees mentioned that at the end citizens who knew each other well, who knew each other's parents and ancestors, would not go to fight each other anyway.

Despite the residents' fear about inter-ethnic conflict, no clashes occurred in Isfana after the 2010 Osh events. Unfortunately, however, the events caused a pause in the relationship between the two groups for a period of time. By observing interactions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz one can feel these events brought

a certain coldness to these encounters and caused suspicion towards each other. It has also led to an increased interest in the historical background and dominance of each ethnicity in Isfana. It is mostly noticeable in the books on the history of Isfana. There are several books about the history of the town which are not necessarily evidence-based. They usually contain stories, fables about the town and Leilek District, retell biographies of the public figures and finish with poems by local writers. History books in the Uzbek language are usually printed in Khujand, Tajikistan and in the Kyrgyz language are printed in Bishkek, although books in both languages need to get approval from the local administration committee on their accuracy before being printed. In the Uzbek language, these books focus only on Isfana and its connection to nearby territories, whereas in the Kyrgyz language history books focus on Leilek District as a whole and Isfana as a part of it. Due to this, and to the lack of scholarly history books on the town, one cannot guess or trace any facts about the role or number of Uzbeks in Isfana. In fact, it is true that in Leilek District, Uzbeks are a minority as they live only in Isfana and some other small villages. However, the fact that Isfana is mostly populated by Uzbeks is not mentioned in any local history books in the Kyrgyz language. This approach by local writers of highlighting one's own ethnic group shows the attempt of residents to alter their role in the history books, so they will be able to prove their point in the future if any dispute occurs—and to raise a new generation and tell them with confidence to whom this place should belong, and indeed has belonged, from historical times.

## IX. CONCLUSION

This study shows that Isfana's multicultural and multi-ethnic past, its ethnic composition, shared social

life, sports and life-cycle rituals, and unique figures like Razzakov and Azizov help to sustain a pluralistic society. Each of these factors plays a significant role and contributes to peace in the town. If any of them were to decrease or change, this might have negative consequences, which could result in the different ethnic groups and residents of Isfana alienating and ignoring each other; thus, leading to loss of social capital in the town.

Findings show that some aspects of social capital such as social trust, informal communication and community co-operation are affected by neighbourhood diversity. With the help of informal community activities like joint festivals, for example, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks try to adopt norms from each other in order to look more advanced in the eyes of their inner community. Kyrgyz people try to organize their weddings in a more Uzbek way, whereas Uzbeks adopt Kyrgyz norms in order to introduce some changes to the long established ways of celebration. This proves that diversity shapes community norms. In addition, the case of Isfana has shown that the more diverse a social environment is, the more it can display higher levels of tolerance and opportunities for building social capital. This is reinforced by the fact that Uzbek and Kyrgyz share the same religion, Soviet past and Central Asian identity.

For both groups, there has been an increase in the search for identity, which is moving the dialogue between two groups in a more negative direction. Interest in the historical roots of both ethnic groups has led to a number of publications in local languages in which two parallel stories exist about the history of the town, with Kyrgyz history books excluding the presence of Uzbeks, and Uzbek books narrating Uzbek-dominated stories of the town. The 2010 Osh events also impacted the interaction and trust between these ethnic groups. Nowadays, the two ethnic groups continue to live side by side and interact on a daily basis peacefully, though with some degree of caution. Keeping this in mind, and with respect to the telling of

history, the narration of the history of any land, Isfana included, should focus on the land and its inhabitants throughout its history and not on specific people or groups at the expense or exclusion of others.

A common adage among Uzbeks, passed from generation to generation, is “*shu tuproq farzandimiz*,” which means, “we are all children of this land.” Any ethnic group living in Isfana agrees that belonging to this place and to the same religious group should come before ethnic identity. This is how connection to one’s motherland is seen to hold priority over ethnicity in Isfana. The people of the town consider themselves first and foremost Isfanans. Isfana remains one of the few places in Kyrgyzstan where citizens interact on a daily basis and organize social occasions together, which surely represents a form of pluralism in the country.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Centre gratefully acknowledges the members of the project's international advisory committee: Gulnara Aitpaeva (Aigine Cultural Research Center, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan), Morgan Liu (Ohio State University, Columbus, USA), Benjamin Loring (Victor Pinchuk Foundation, Kiev, Ukraine) and Jeff Sahadeo (Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada).

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